

Wish You Were Here by **TheLostSister**

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Summary:

Joyce comes to Murray's place one last time to talk things over before moving to California.

Wish You Were Here

Joyce sinks back against the soft plush of the couch with a heavy sigh. After the day they've had, the documents they've combed through, the phone calls they've made, and the progress they've gotten (essentially zero), she is exhausted.

She glances down at her watch and feels like bursting into tears. Her day began at 6 am with a 5 hour drive to Murray's so they could speak in person, and somehow, it is already nearly 9 pm. It's not that late, but with another 5 hour drive home ahead of her to get back to Hawkins, it may as well have been the middle of the night already.

She closes her eyes and presses her fingertips against her brow bone in attempt to ease the painful tension in her head. It started several hours ago, that dull ache that she's too familiar with, and has only seemed to progress as the day wore on. Now just the thought of driving home alone for the next 5 hours suddenly seems very overwhelming.

Joyce is not one to give up hope easily, but these days, she is just so tired. So tired of having to be everything for everybody. So tired of the uncertainty. But mostly, so tired of being alone. This what Hopper had warned her about that day back at the lab. If she moved, if she tried to run away from all of this, she would be alone.

Except now, it didn't matter where she was. The outcome would always be the same.

Her only true friend was gone, and day in and day out, she has to live with the fact that she is alone.

Physically, she wasn't always alone, usually having at least one of the three kids at home in their small house, and not really even kids, but mature teenagers, one nearly a legal adult himself. However, they all had their own friends, and with the Wheeler's being the designated hang out spot, there were those occasional nights where her house was filled with silence. But it didn't really matter if there were three kids home or none, she would never dream of putting this sort of stress on any of them. It wasn't their job to take care of her and it

wouldn't be fair to ask them to manage this information when she could barely handle it herself most days. El especially. She was struggling enough coping with all the abrupt changes and her own grief, to then dangle the possibility of her dad being alive in front of her, with nothing she could do about...Well, Joyce could never.

Though not much was accomplished today, it was still one of her better days since early July. Or at least it was one day where she didn't have to hide what she was feeling, and maybe that's why it seemed slightly more bearable.

Murray is here with her, and she has someone to talk to without concern of being judged, someone who didn't worry that she is on the brink of losing her mind, even if that may be true. But she made sure not to get too comfortable. This would be their last in person visit before she packed up the life she knew and moved across the entire country.

If a 5 hour drive was too far, they were soon to be separated by 30 hours. Plus, she tried hard not to misunderstand their relationship. She and Murray were only acquaintances brought together by unusual circumstances. None of this is personal to him; he is simply on his never ending, journalistic, pursuit for the truth. It honestly wouldn't surprise Joyce if she never heard from him again after the move.

Or at least, that's what she had believed prior to this evening.

Lost in her thoughts, she doesn't hear Murray reenter the room until his voice cuts through the silence.

"You alright Joyce?"

He was coming back from cleaning up their dinner plates that have sat empty for many hours to now find her sitting on the couch, head in her hands. He could tell she'd been under a lot of stress the moment she walked in earlier today. Gaining another child, hiding a massive conspiracy, selling your house, quitting your job, and planning a move across the country certainly would be a lot for the average single person to handle. Add on top of that, the fact that your best friend may be held in a Russian torture slave camp halfway

across the globe, and well, he couldn't blame her for feeling a little worn out.

She sighs and rubs her neck. She's really not okay, the hitch in her breath gives that away.

"Oh uhm, yeah, yeah. I'm fine." She takes a deep breath and stands up. "I should probably get going. I'm just going to use the bathroom real quick," she points to the stairway and disappears.

It's an excuse for an escape. Murray doesn't need to witness a full on Joyce Byers breakdown, which it feels almost too overwhelming at this point to stop. The sheer exhaustion must have pushed her this far because despite all the stress, she somehow manages to successfully compartmentalize to get through most days. Or maybe it's because she set out this morning so hopeful, yet it feels like they are no closer to Hopper than the night he disappeared.

The weight of that and everything else is slowing crashing down on her. The time that's passing too quickly yet somehow also at a snail's pace, the move, the kids, *Jim*, and so much guilt that sometimes she only gets out of bed each day because she knows her children need her to be functional once in awhile. Then there's the nearly constant dread of what the next day will bring, the anxiety that she feels every time her phone rings, knowing one of these times it's going to be that phone call "...*Joyce, something happened.*"

It's like she's swimming in an ocean with no land in sight and she's not sure how much longer she can keep this all up.

She turns the tap on as cold as it can manage and stands at the sink with the water running before her, lost in the moment for too long. The water is so cold that it makes her fingers ache when she puts them under the stream. She splashes it over her face and it's enough of a shock to pull her back to the present.

Compartmentalize, Joyce. It's nothing new. Hell, it might be the one thing you are getting pretty good at. Walk down the stairs. Thank Murray for his help. Say a quick goodbye and put one foot in front of the other until you are in the car. Start it up, put it in drive, and begin the long trek home. Simple, really.

A few deep breaths later and she has a brief moment where she feels capable. She's learned to take advantage of those little moments; it's the only way she gets things done.

"I really do have to get going but thanks again for everything, Murray," Joyce tells him once she's descended the steps. She walks to where her purse sits on the chair and slings it over her shoulder, ready to flee.

"We're finally getting somewhere," Murray promises earnestly.

Joyce nods, even though it feels like a lie.

"Are you sure you want to drive home tonight? You could take the guest bedroom and leave in the morning," Murray offers.

Joyce's eyes flash to him. He's looking at her like everyone back home does now. A mixture of pity and worry, something she thought she didn't have to think about around him. Obviously, she's not doing as fabulous of a job at hiding the impending breakdown as she originally thought.

This was one of the things she honestly couldn't wait to get away from. To have a fresh start, somewhere where she could be anonymous, where there wouldn't be 5 whispers at the mention of her name, a constant reminder of everything that's happened.

It's always the same, *Hi, Joyce, how are you doing? I know you and the Chief were close after well, you know, everything with Will...* people always say quietly, as if it's a taboo topic.

Of course, there's the few people who stay out of the town's gossip pipeline and do have a genuine concern for how she's doing, but if she were to count, it's certainly less than a handful. Then there's the others- their faux pleasantries laden with soft accusations and questions, although no one ever has the courage to say any of it in front of her.

But it didn't matter; she would always hear them anyway.

I heard the FBI is investigating the Byers' kids...Again, I know!...Did you see that girl at the memorial service with Joyce?...Rumor is, the Chief

knocked up some woman while he was married. And his wife was pregnant too...Doesn't surprise me either...Explains why he never talked about her...But if you ask me, Joyce should focus on trying to raise her own two kids rather than taking in another, surely there's someone else in the system who could take that girl...

People talking about her is one thing, she's learned to compartmentalize that too. But people talking about her kids would always upset her. That's why this move would be best for Will and Jonathon too, but even more so for El, as she also had her own share of demons in this town too. She's never been allowed to be a normal kid, and Joyce focused on the hope that she could build something that resembled a stable life for her far from this place.

Joyce edges closer to the door.

"No thank you. I really should try to get back home tonight," she excuses.

"Okay, well, when you get to Cali, let me know your new phone number, alright?"

Joyce is barely even listening anymore. She just needs to get out of there.

"Yeah, of course," she manages to reply. She makes it to the door, the same place that she once stood with Jim just a few months ago, though that almost feels like it was somebody else's life now. If she could just go back to that night...

Joyce steps outside and gives a quick wave to Murray. The early fall air is crisp and refreshing; maybe if she rolls down her windows on the drive, it will be enough to snap her out of this. Joyce digs through her purse for her keys, first finding the familiar knotted edges of the braided keychain that El made for her. She pulls them free from the clutter, but her hands are shaking and the keys drop, disappearing somewhere between her seat and center console.

It's something so simple. All she has to do is get back out of the car and feel under the seat for them, but suddenly her heart is racing, and she can't breathe properly anymore.

Murray stands inside, watching the grainy television screen that oversees his yard, waiting for Joyce to make it out on the road safely. He feels a sort of responsibility for her, as if he'd made Jim a promise to keep her in one piece until he could get back to her. Of course, there'd been no such discussion between the two, but for some reason, it sure feels like there was. After a few minutes, his motion detector lights turn off and he's left staring at a black screen, waiting for the red glow of her taillights. When he doesn't see them, he starts to grow worried. Murray slips on a pair of shoes and steps outside. The intense flood lights turn back on and he peers in her car window.

Joyce has her head in her hands, much like he found her earlier. He taps on her door. She doesn't respond, so he opens the door and leans down to her level.

"Joyce, everything okay?"

"I dropped...my...keys," she answers softly between hiccupping breaths.

He can't exactly make out what she said. "What was that?"

"The keys...fell," she tries again, pointing to the floor, her sentence punctuated by sharp inhales.

Murray assesses the situation and quickly determines there's a little more going on than just a missing set of keys.

"Okay, no big deal, but why don't you come back inside with me for a minute," Murray offers.

"No, I...I really have to go..."

"Alright, hold on," Murray tells her, kneeling down, blindly feeling under the seat for the keys. He locates them in just a second, but Joyce is nearly hyperventilating and there's no way he can let her go like this. "Hmm, can't find them," Murray lies, deftly slipping them into the pocket of his oversized robe. "Let's go inside for just a minute and I will look for a flashlight." He puts a hand to her forearm and helps her up out of the car with far less fight than expected.

He leads her to his living room and guides her to sit down on the couch. Murray sits next to Joyce quietly for a few minutes, his arm around her shoulder. She finally comes out of her panic attack with a deep breath and a realization of where she is. Two tears skip over her cheeks, falling straight from her eyes to her lap.

"I'm really sorry. I don't know..." she trails off.

"It's okay, Joyce," Murray promises like he means it, though she knows there's surely a small part of him that wishes he didn't have to deal with her mess. As if she made that statement out loud, he reiterates, "Really, it's okay."

"I just- I want to be able to breathe," she looks to him for a second and then back to her lap. "I want this noise in my head to be quiet." Shaking fingertips press against her temple. "Just for 5 fucking minutes. I just want 5 minutes of peace, and I feel guilty, just so guilty, for even wishing for that knowing that Jim's out there going through God knows what..."

"I get it, Joyce. I really do," Murray begins. "But you have no reason to feel guilty. You are in the middle of so much...shit. Absolute shit." He squeezes her shoulder a little bit tighter. "It's really okay to feel like it's too much, because *it is*," he stresses. "But I also think you should know that you are handling all of this better than most anyone else could ever dream of," he tells her sincerely.

"Doesn't feel like it," she snuffles. "It doesn't feel like I'm handling it at *all*."

"Are you serious? Your kids have a roof over their heads, they have food on the table, they have a mother who would go to the ends of the goddamn earth, and hell, walk into a literal warzone ready to fight until her last breath if it meant they would be kept safe."

His frankness surprises Joyce, though he's never been one to sugarcoat or tell her a lie.

"I don't know how else to put it, but you *are* doing something," he reiterates.

They stay quiet for another minute. "I really am sorry to make you have to put up with all of this," Joyce apologizes again once she's collected herself.

"Kind of feels like the world's ending and we're the only ones who know it huh," Murray sighs.

Joyce's eyes meet his, and there's a certain understanding there.

"This won't last forever. I mean, it can't, right?" he adds.

"I don't know," Joyce shakes her head. "Does it matter one way or the other? It's eating me alive. Every day that passes, just knowing he's out there somewhere, thinking about what condition he's being held in." Joyce runs a hand through her hair.

"And we're one day closer than we were before," he promises.

"But what if we're not? I mean, there are only two endings here. Either he comes home...or he doesn't."

The weight of what it means if he doesn't come home isn't lost on Murray, and he can't argue because she's not wrong. Instead, he abruptly gets up and disappears upstairs.

Joyce takes the time alone to collect herself. Even though Murray seems to understand, it's embarrassing being vulnerable and on display for anyone else like this. There's some crashing around upstairs, enough that Joyce is about to get up to see what's going on when Murray comes back down the stairs holding something up in the air.

Joyce cocks an eyebrow and Murray sits down on the floor in front of the coffee table. He lays out the supplies he's carried down.

"*What* are you doing?" Joyce has to laugh because the sheer absurdity of this could bring no better response.

"You said you wanted a moment of peace," Murray reminds her.

He works quickly while Joyce watches in almost a state of awe; there's no way this is happening. Murray takes his creation and licks

the edges of the paper, evaluating it from all angles, before presenting a perfectly rolled joint of marijuana.

“You can’t be serious. I am not smoking that,” Joyce laughs again.

“Oh, come on. Like I said, you can sleep in the guest bedroom tonight and head home first thing in the morning.”

“No,” she tells him again, shaking her head. “And why do you even have that?”

Murray ignores her and snags the lighter leftover from Joyce’s earlier cigarettes from the middle of the table. He brings the flame to the tip, thoroughly roasting the end before taking a long puff.

Joyce stares at him incredulously.

Murray offers it to her again, and she declines for a third time, admittedly half-heartedly at best. “Probably will just make it worse anyway,” she excuses with a small shake of her head.

“Ah, so you’re a paranoid stoner. I could see that,” he nods.

Joyce smirks. “No. I mean, I don’t know. I wasn’t always like this.” Her hands twist anxiously in her lap at the reminder of what her life was like 20 years ago.

“Like what?”

It takes her a moment to reply, and Murray takes a second puff.

“A mess,” she finally admits softly.

He nods. “I get it. I wasn’t always like this either.” He gestures to the home he’s made for himself. One that if you didn’t know it, you’d think you were stepping into the territory of a conspiracist nutjob, and maybe at one point in his life, you wouldn’t be that far off from the truth.

“No?” she smiles.

“No,” he confirms but doesn’t elaborate.

Joyce doesn't press it because she understands. One little thing can happen to you that can change your entire reason for existing. She lets out a deep sigh.

"Give me that," Joyce relents in defeat. She drags the partially full ashtray over and gently taps the joint to the side.

She brings it to her lips and takes a deep inhale, holding the smoke in her lungs for a few seconds until she can't take the burn in her throat any longer, letting it out with a cough.

Murray gets up to pour her a glass of water. "Nice, right?" he calls on his way to the kitchen. "Columbia black. A bit hard to find, so I only bring it out for special occasions."

"And this qualifies as one?"

"I mean, yes, I guess so," he tells her, handing her the glass of water. "Seems like you needed a little something to take the edge off the day."

Joyce takes a sip of water and after a few moments, a second puff, no cough this time.

"Thank you," she sighs honestly, handing the joint back. They sit in silence for a few minutes. "Guess I should call the kids and tell them I won't be home tonight," Joyce finally realizes.

Murray nods, and she hoists herself up off the couch, almost instantly feeling lightheaded. She stops near the arm of the couch to catch her balance.

"You good Byers?"

The feeling passes, quickly replaced by a wave of something else. Could this possibly be *calm*?

"Yeah. It's just been a few years," she laughs, trying to recall the last time she was high. It had to have been sometime before she was pregnant with Jonathan. What was she thinking doing this tonight? She's too old and what would the kids think if they somehow found out.

Murray fingers through his large and diverse record collection while Joyce phones home. He pulls a few from the back of the pile that haven't been played in years and sets them aside. Joyce maintains her composure on the phone, but as soon as she hangs up, she bursts out in laughter. "*What* am I doing?"

"You are... forgiving yourself for just one night."

This felt incredibly unreal having another person say that to her. Dare she say, having a friend?

"You're welcome to pick something to listen to," Murray nods to the record stack.

Joyce nods and thumbs through the pile, deciding on a Solomon Burke album

"Interesting choice. Are you trying to come on to me Byers?"

Joyce instantly freezes. She wasn't, but was *he*? Was she a complete idiot who has totally misread the situation? She immediately starts to panic inside. If that's the case, even under the influence, it wouldn't be hard to tell him no, but she is in no shape to make a quick exit and things would definitely be awkward.

"Relax, I'm kidding! No offense but you aren't exactly my type."

"I don't know if I should be offended or relieved," Joyce smirks, resuming her spot on the couch plucking the joint from his hand for 2 more hits.

Murray ignores her statement. "Anyway, I think Jim would murder me with his bare hands if I laid so much as an eyeball on you." To which Joyce makes a sound of disbelief. "Shake your head all you want but it's true."

"What makes you so sure?"

"About what?"

"Me and Hop. You saw us together for barely a day and you—"

"I what?" he interrupts proudly. "Had you both all figured out? It was obvious from the moment I met you. You were both oozing so much sexual tension that any dimwit with an amoeba for a brain could feel it."

Joyce scoffs again- the exact sound she made the night that feels like so long ago now when Murray called them both out in the car.

"Honestly though, I know you had a few bad relationships and Jim has a reputation in town, but I really don't know how you two managed to do absolutely nothing about your reciprocal feelings for each other for so long. Especially after everything you guys went through together."

"I only really had *one* bad relationship," Joyce corrects. "Being with Bob wasn't bad."

"It just ended bad," Murray finishes for her.

Joyce pauses for a moment, her mind drifting. If she's trying to focus on forgiving herself, then having a conversation about Bob certainly isn't the topic to delve into, at least not tonight.

"For what it's worth, I know you would be more than just a notch on Jim's bedpost. You mean something to him."

"How?"

"Hm?"

"How can you tell?" Joyce repeats. She wants to know that she's not making this up in her head now that he's gone; she wants to confirm that what they had was real. That Hop wanted something more too. Sure, he was the one who asked her out first, but now that he's gone, she sometimes worries that she's concocting stories and making up feelings between them that were never really there. Sometimes it feels so hard to remember what it was like with him. It was always so easy. He was always just there when she needed him, never asking for anything in return.

"For starters, I've spent a lot of time studying people. Private detective, remember?" Murray explains.

“You’d rather study other people than be with them,” Joyce accuses, turning the tables on their conversation.

“Yeah, I’d say that’s fair,” Murray agrees easily.

“I’m sensing a fair bit of your own trauma there, Bauman,” she teases now.

“I suppose.” He stands up and heads to the kitchen with a smirk. “But tonight is your therapy session, not mine.”

“Where are you going?”

“Snacks. I’m starving. Aren’t you?”

Joyce rolls her eyes at his abrupt subject change when it came to discussing *his* issues. But she can’t complain because she is suddenly very hungry. “Yes,” she calls from the couch in agreement. “But I’m gonna need you to deliver any and all snacks to me in here please,” she adds because she’s pretty sure she won’t be able to make it off the couch.

Murray comes back in the room with an armload of snacks. He drops a bunch of bananas, a bag of potato chips, a bag of Funyuns, a block of mozzarella cheese, half a box of frosted mini wheats, and a container of peanut butter on the table in front of her.

She eyes the items wondering who would put such things together and then looks at Murray.

“What the hell...?” she asks.

And then she’s giggling, and Murray is laughing too, so hard that neither of them can stop, until Joyce can barely breathe and has happy tears running down her cheeks.

“Imagine Jim’s face when I tell him about getting high with you. Think he’ll believe it?”

“No, definitely not,” she smiles.

“You two ever smoke a little mary jay together back in the day?”

She shakes her head, “Don’t think so.”

“Well, when he comes home, we’ll all have a little celebration. What do you say?”

*When he comes home...*for once, the thought doesn’t send her into a spiraling fit of anxiety. Instead, she feels a sense of relief.

“Wish he was here now,” Joyce pines openly.

“I know, but soon, Joyce,” Murray promises and for tonight, she allows herself to believe him.

Conversation drifts easily for the next few hours about nothing in particular until the music is no longer playing and Joyce has grown quiet.

“Joyce?” Murray calls eyeballing her on the couch. No answer.

It takes a second before he finds the energy to get up from the chair, knowing he will feel like garbage if he passes out there for the night. He confirms that Joyce is asleep and finds a blanket, placing it over her. Murray turns the lights off and Joyce stirs awake.

“The spare bedroom is there if you want it,” he nods, before heading to the stairs. “But fair warning, I’m pretty sure your son lost his virginity in that bed.”

“What?” Joyce murmurs in a sleepy haze. She sits up halfway and guzzles the rest of the glass of water.

Murray ignores her question and instead calls from the top of the steps, “Goodnight!”

Joyce shakes her head, not even sure if this conversation is real anymore and rolls over on the couch. She buries her head in her arms and quickly passes out again for the rest of the night.